

**Bruce Foster, Chairman of the Legislative Committee, PA War Veterans Council**  
**PA Senate Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committee Hearing on Veterans'**  
**Issues**  
**February 25, 2015**

Good afternoon Chairman Vulakovich, Chairman Costa and all distinguished members present. On behalf of the Pennsylvania War Veterans Council, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to share with you issues we feel important to veterans of the commonwealth both young and old.

Annually the Pennsylvania War Veterans Council establishes its legislative goals and the State Veterans Commission either adapts or modifies those goals as their own. This vote will take place at the next scheduled meeting of the Commission however Chairman Brenner has authorized me to include his remarks in today's testimony because it was unclear if he would be able to testify separately because of his surgical procedure performed just yesterday.

Today's veterans joined the military for a number of reasons, answering the call to duty, taking a stance against terrorism, education and monetary benefits, personal satisfaction, pride, family tradition, honor, learning new skills, self improvement and many other reasons. Veterans of my age group and older may have had some additional incentive from their local Selective Service Office. Regardless, Pennsylvania veterans became veterans by serving their country at the federal level and rightfully the federal government is responsible to offer the largest share of benefits to care and recognize the service of veterans, dependents and their survivors. We at the state level have authorized our own array of benefits under Title 51 PaCode. The greatest challenge we face is ensuring our diverse veteran population of almost a million veterans, geographically located in all 67 counties are continually and I repeat the word continually, aware of benefits they are eligible to receive. Some of these benefits such as transition assistance, healthcare, counseling, employment assistance and education benefits are needed shortly or immediately following service. Other benefits such as service connection for injuries or illnesses may or may not arise for years following service because of unknown exposures veterans faced during their military service. Veterans suffering from Post traumatic stress, those facing homelessness, long term unemployment, all need immediate assistance. VA Pension, aid and attendance may not be required until late in a veterans golden years and many of our aged veterans know nothing about the program today. Burial and Memorial benefits are the end of the benefit cycle for the veteran and the beginning of Dependents and survivors benefits. It seems eligibility standards and procedures change almost daily based upon decisions from the Court of Veterans Appeals, internal VA rule changes, and congressional actions. A few examples are effective January 1<sup>st</sup> of this year the VA eliminated the asset rule

for enrollment in the VA Healthcare system. This change opens the door for many previously denied or never applied veterans whose assets were too high to enroll. The Department of Defense is currently reviewing the records of all veterans separated from the service for issues related to mental health. This review will lead to discharge changes and eligibility for many veterans who were previously ineligible. Presumptive conditions are continually added to the list of conditions recognized for service connection. My point is veteran outreach is a never ending process.

Studies conducted from 1991 to 2015 all conclude Pennsylvania lags behind other states in receipt of benefits. However we cannot change history. Pennsylvania lags behind other states because our outreach has been ineffective, underfunded and understaffed for decades. For the most part the approach has been we are willing to do anything for veterans as long as it doesn't cost anything. We understand budget constraints but also know the positive impact veterans benefits have on society as a whole. We disagree with the 2015 Veterans Needs Assessment Report and Summary conducted by Penn State when it states the Commonwealth generally has the capacity, programming and personnel to adequately care for the needs of its veterans. We do agree that Communications and Integration of services are huge problems in our state. We strongly recommend that your committee look toward the Texas Veterans Commission as a model of excellence in integration. We support the concept of having a Cabinet level leader of Veteran Affairs in Pennsylvania. Just as a small example, I tried last week to identify who are the current Veteran Employment Representatives in our state so that I could provide a list to our Outreach personnel. I think I have decent research ability skills but after more than an hour of searching I was unable to identify these representatives and I am sure a veteran could not either. Effective Outreach includes Claims representatives; Counseling, Employment, Education and effective use of the Veterans Trust fund all working together to outreach.

In 2007, then Governor Ed Rendell, signed the VSO Grant program into law as Act 66 of 2007. This program has proved itself as an effective Veterans Outreach program. Annually, each participant is required to send a report to your committee of its effectiveness and results for the prior year. The number one legislative priority of the Pennsylvania War Veterans Council and the State Veterans Commission for the last eight years has been to properly fund this program. We were successful for five of these eight years to keep a separate line item in the DMVA Budget for this program. We always knew what was being appropriated and funded in the past to give us some security the program would continue. Now other programs are being funded under this same line item. If your Committee reviewed this line item you would conclude that funding has continually increased and wonder why we are asking for more funding. The truth is we have not increased our service officer wages since 2008. We simply cannot afford too. Our out of pocket organizational contributions toward the program continue to grow. We want to restructure our salary system but benefits, taxes, travel costs all continue

to strain the program. It doesn't help that just since 2012, DMVA Outreach Service Officers salaries have increased on average 23% while those funded under the grant program have remained the same. A state employed service officer starting salary is currently \$45,066 while a VSO Service Officer starting salary remains at \$28,000. Please help us maintain a separate clean line item limited to funds appropriated to Veteran Service Organizations for the sole purpose of funding and training VA accredited Outreach Service Officers. Title 51, PaCode, Chapter 89 requires the State Veterans Commission to adjust the Rebuttable Presumptive level for Real Estate Tax Exemption every two years. The change is based on the change in the Consumer Price Index. We think it only fair to ask the Veteran Outreach program funding receive at least the same consideration. Please understand the whole purpose of this program is to provide Outreach to veterans and more funding equates to more outreach. Much of our outreach is done in Legislative Offices and this partnership has proved very effective.

Last year our committee supported Representative Barrar's bill on providing in state education rates to veterans and dependents who moved to Pennsylvania regardless of his/her former state of residence. With the passage of the federal Veterans Access, Choice and Accountability Act of 2014 we thought the issue was answered. However we continue to support HB 131 because Section 702 of the choice Act limits the rates to within three years of discharge. The time limit for most educational benefits under Title 38 USC is normally 15 years. Many veterans do not enroll in school immediately following discharge and we support the protection HB 131 offers them with no time limits ..

Our committee continues to support a Veterans Lottery Ticket. A lottery ticket sold twice annually surrounding Veterans and Memorial Day. We understand Pennsylvania is the only state in the nation to use lottery funding for services that support its older residents. We simply feel veterans answered a call others did not and the proceeds from a veterans lottery ticket should be used specifically to the dignity, outreach and protection of older veterans. I promise you it would be a very popular ticket. HB 601 is a great starting bill..

The last two years The Pennsylvania War Veterans Council and the State Veterans Commission have taken an active role in fighting off changing existing laws on predatory payday lending in Pennsylvania. Payday lenders surround military bases throughout the nation. We have stood proud of many of our state legislators who held the line as lobbyists' have done their best to bring payday lending to our state. Its been a close battle and we fully expect it to continue but we will continue to circled the wagons in the veterans community to keep predatory lending laws some of the strongest in the Nation here in Pennsylvania.

We support HB 175 extending the application period for the Persian Gulf War Bonus as our Outreach personnel continue to report finding veterans who are unaware of the bonus program and funding remains. We support this extension with the caveat that it does not delay

or extend the period we begin to work on a bonus program for Operation Enduring Freedom, Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation New Dawn (OEF/OIF/OND).

We support HB 496 as a beginning for OIF/OEF/OND bonus program and hope the senate will take up this action as their own. We have heard it said that legislation being discussed surrounding the payment of a monetary bonus for this veteran group may be limited to a certificate or state medal. Today's veterans expect the same consideration afforded combat veterans who preceded them. Many states have already begun this compensation and we hope Pennsylvania makes every effort to recognize the service of these great Americans.

In closing, again I would like to thank the Committee for providing us this opportunity to share our thoughts and goals here today. The Pennsylvania War Veterans Council and State Veterans Commission are more than willing to work with your staff on any legislation pertaining to veterans. In departing I ask that your Committee use its influence to erase the more than \$700,000 the Department of Military & Veterans Affairs is being charged by the Department of Transportation for the veteran's designation on Driver Licenses. When you pass a law with unfunded mandates one Department should not be able to charge another. It's funding that could better be used helping veterans.

This concludes my prepared remarks.